

JONAS SAUL

A Sarah Roberts Thriller

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a striped long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, is running away from the viewer through a snowy forest. The trees are thin and bare, and the ground is covered in snow. The image has a motion blur effect, suggesting she is running quickly.

THE VIGILANTE

Book Seven

The Vigilante

by

Jonas Saul

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The Vigilante

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Chapter 1

Friday, February 29, 2008 ...

Death is the ultimate reset.

The cycle had continued day after day, year after year. Birth, then death, resetting everything but never fixing anything. Healing the errors could only happen with a reset. Nothing could be gained, nothing allowed to move forward without the reset, which would make things right.

The lessons in the healing were what made it all possible for him. It was why he did it. What he offered his mannequins was something no one ever offered them before. No one was willing to offer after either.

Silence. Absolute. A quieting of the soul. Then the reset.

He gathered his tools, placed them in the black medical bag, then folded up the thick plastic sheet they had lain on and stuffed it inside a separate duffel bag. He took one last look around to make sure he had removed any proof that he had ever been there. It wouldn't do to be found out. He wouldn't be able to offer new dolls a reset if light was shed on his practices. And there were so many more dolls to offer silence to.

Both mannequins in the basement of the abandoned farm, thirty miles from the northern tip of Toronto, lay on the dirty floor as if the cold didn't bother their exposed skin. A winter storm had blown in overnight, covering his tracks from the previous evening. By the time he finished his work and departed for good, the storm that still dropped a wrath of snow from the dark morning sky would obliterate any new tracks within an hour.

"My little pretty ones," he whispered, not wanting to wake either mannequin. "The lessons you teach are for the enlightened. And now you are. No longer will I pay the price. Nor will you, because now you're both exalted."

He zipped the medical bag and slung it over his shoulder. After grabbing the duffel bag, he walked away.

At the large wooden doors, he unhooked the chains that bound them and fastened the locks to the handles. Even these tools would come with him. No one could ever see this farm as anything but an abandoned plot of land with broken buildings and the spirit of the landowner extinguished long ago.

When he pulled the doors open, a blast of cold wind and snow assaulted him. His eyes had closed, he pushed into the snow and popped the trunk of his vehicle with the key fob. After dropping his bags in, he slammed it shut and struggled through the knee-deep snow to the car door.

The thought of being stuck out here, his Range Rover unable to forge a path to the main highway caused him concern. Instead, he focused on his destiny and how every four years on the leap year, he had fulfilled it without mistake or discovery. This was what he was meant to do. If that wasn't true

then why had success been his for the taking?

The mannequins needed the reset in their lives. There was no other way.

There simply wasn't.

Maybe next time, he would help more than just two.

After warming up the vehicle, he returned to the inside of the barn where he found respite from the bitter wind. A shudder coursed through him. He brushed the fresh snow off his shoulders and stomped his feet near the door's edge, then scuffed the shoe prints.

After making his way back through the barn, careful to step around the snow piled under holes in the broken wooden roof, he descended the stairs into the basement where cattle were once milked and slaughtered. The back door looked out onto a large green field now covered in a white blanket.

His mannequins hadn't moved. They were nestled together, limbs appearing disjointed, as if an angry child had tried to break the arms off her oversized Barbie Doll. They lay inside his homemade prison cell, built in the basement of his home and welded together here before his mannequins arrived. He needed to be certain that upon his exit, neither mannequin would walk, or crawl, away. The small metal prison assured that.

After removing their clothes, he had laid them on their stomachs on the cold earthen floor, bits of straw caught under their light weight, their skin gone to pale in the chill.

"Why are you mannequins so thin?" he asked out loud. "How could the women of today even match this glorious size?"

But he knew why. They hadn't eaten in a week. When they had arrived, he'd removed their tongues so neither mannequin could talk, which meant they couldn't protest, ask for anything, or scream for help.

It was all about the reset. Putting things right by putting them in their proper place. In the end, he had done the right thing. He knew it and could live with that. These two represented six mannequins so far that he'd helped reset in the previous eight years.

To date, none of his mannequins had ever been discovered. At least not as far as he knew.

But now it was time to leave.

"Goodbye," he whispered in the ear of the blonde mannequin. He thought he detected movement behind her eyes, but dismissed it as imagination.

He moved to the brunette doll, knelt over her shoulder and whispered in her ear, "It has been a pleasure allowing you to see the error of your ways. Sleep well my beauties. Goodbye."

This doll's eyes moved.

He got to his feet fast and stepped back.

~~How?~~

One eye opened and searched for him. Without the strength needed to manipulate her neck muscles, she struggled to find him.

He moved into her line of sight. As he did, the one eye watching him widened as far as the lid allowed.

A low moan escaped her chest. Then a shudder passed through her body and her eye lowered, the lid remaining open, life leaving the gaze.

“Sleep well, my mannequins.”

He moved away, a wide smile playing across his lips. With his fingers wrapped in black leather gloves, he fastened the lock to the homemade prison door and clicked it in place, then tested its veracity. Walking backwards, he watched them, feeling a small sense of loss. He would miss his time with them. These two had been fun. It wasn't often he got to take so much pleasure during a reset. The next reset was four years away. Maybe then he would help four mannequins ascend to their rightful place.

He slid an old wooden door into place, shielding his caged dolls from anyone who happened upon the decrepit barn. He rubbed one hand across his bald pate as he turned to leave.

At the exit to the barn, his Range Rover idling behind him, he held the door a moment longer.

“Death is the ultimate reset,” he whispered.

Then he closed the door.

Chapter 2

February 20, 2012 ...

Sarah Roberts tightened the scarf around her neck and dipped her face enough to shield against the sudden bitter wind.

Torontonians talked about a January thaw that seemed to be a yearly thing, but it was already past mid-February and there had been no thaw yet—only cold and wind and more snow.

She was on her way to the first task assigned to her in five months. Her sister Vivian had been strangely quiet before Christmas, but now numerous notes had come through—odd, seeming unconnected messages. Normally Vivian didn't work that way. Somehow, what Sarah was about to do had a bearing on future events, even though Vivian had told Sarah to lie to the people she was about to meet.

The five-month break had served Sarah well. She had been given a chance to visit Parkman in Maine, and when he headed back to Santa Rosa California, she continued on to Toronto, the FBI tailing her the entire time.

She thought it funny how when the Sophia Project men had followed her, they would sit her down, explain their purpose and even protect her from harm a few times. These FBI men stayed in the shadows, never approaching, never wanting to talk. She had tried a few times, but they had backed away from her and left the area.

But they were always there. At any given time, she could look over her shoulder and see her tailors watching, following. When it got annoying, she would lose them. But within a day, sometimes even hours, they would show up again.

Who funded this kind of mission? Five months of tailing one girl, two men on rotating shifts. That was convincing enough that they were seriously interested in her, but yet they hadn't initiated contact.

Her step faltered.

Maybe that was why Vivian had been silent all this time.

A quick backward glance couldn't confirm if she was being followed as the snow caught up in the wind, swirled around the roadside trees and blew across the street, limiting her view to just over ten feet.

The crisis center Vivian told her to go to today came up on her right.

When she got to Toronto, she had shackled up with Aaron Stevens. He hadn't agreed with her decision to come today. They'd argued about it. He appealed that since they were together, if there was something serious that needed handling and Vivian gave Sarah the information on how to handle

it, why couldn't Aaron do it, keeping Sarah safe and out of danger.

Nothing pissed her off more. It was her job to answer Vivian's messages and no one else's. It had always been her job. That was why she had spent the last five months training with Aaron almost every day in hand-to-hand combat. She was ready to deal with whatever came up, confident, stronger, and most of all, healed. Her nose wasn't too crooked after it had been broken in a warehouse in Las Vegas last summer, and the holes where she had been jabbed with a fork had healed up nicely. There was barely a scar.

No one else was meant to handle Vivian's notes but Sarah, and she forbid even the notion that she would involve Aaron.

She stopped in front of the crisis center that was once a house. The outside bore no telltale signs of what was inside. Other than the small sign by the door, it appeared to be like any other house on another street in the older part of downtown Toronto.

She walked up the shoveled stone steps to the front door, where she unwrapped her scarf, stomped her boots and brushed the clumped snow off the bottom of her jeans. Then she twisted the knob and entered the foyer of the building.

A woman stood by a large filing cabinet, rifling through papers. She turned as the door opened.

"Cold one today, eh?" the woman asked.

Sarah nodded, her head hung low, already in the role Vivian had instructed her to play.

After the niceties were dispensed with, the woman had Sarah sit and wait in a comfortable blue chair by a table with magazines. She grabbed one and flipped through its pages. Some of them were missing. She grabbed another magazine and noticed missing pages from it too. Then it dawned on her. They probably remove ads or articles that could be offensive to women, or that could potentially add to the trauma women had gone through before coming to a place like this.

The woman returned and escorted Sarah to a room down a thin hall where another woman was to join her momentarily.

Sarah entered the room and unzipped her winter jacket. The carpeted room was bright, with a main light suspended from the ceiling and two other lights affixed to the wall. Blue chairs sat in each corner, similar to the one in the foyer. She took the seat farthest from the door.

It unsettled her to be at a crisis center under false pretenses. Since Vivian had spoken through her hand in a fit of Automatic Writing two days ago, she had struggled with the notion of lying to people who help the weak in their time of need.

She couldn't determine Vivian's purpose. But in the end, it wasn't her job to determine what Vivian was up to. As long as Sarah did her best to respond to the messages as accurately as she could, everything would work out as it always had—minus the odd broken nose and bullet holes.

One night a few months back, Aaron and Sarah had counted each other's wounds and scars. Sarah had more than double Aaron's, even though he had been shot multiple times almost two years before.

in Greece.

She reminisced on their relationship, considering the fact that maybe they had gotten too close. She needed to be available for Vivian. It had become her job, her life. With Vivian's recent silence, Sarah had gotten comfortable, easing into a daily life of shopping, cooking, and tending to day-to-day tasks, a life she hadn't had since Vivian's first messages almost eight years ago.

She even had a chance to finish the first draft of her memoirs. The story of her first kidnapping, *Dark Visions* was now written and ready for an editor. The second book in her memoirs was called *The Warning*, a name she chose because of Vivian's warning to stay out of the religious commune she entered in pursuit of a horrible man named Armond Stuart.

She'd had time to reflect, time to look inside and see what was important to her and what wasn't. She had realized exactly who she was and how that translated in the real world.

Nothing about who she had become bothered her, but she knew others wouldn't like it. Most of all, it was Aaron's opinion that mattered. She only hoped Aaron could grow to accept her for who she was and what she did without question, because every day they grew closer, more intimate. For the most part, she liked it. But getting that close presented problems, like their recent argument about Vivian's messages and his alpha-male response to want to protect her and handle the messages himself. That was not how it worked.

Besides, he couldn't come to a women's shelter and do what Sarah had to do today.

Hopefully he would learn to trust that side of her.

The door opened and an older woman stepped in, a concerned smile, her aura soft and gentle. She eased the door shut and quietly moved to the blue chair by the door.

"My name is Jennifer," the woman said as she took her seat. "But you can call me Jenny." She paused, then lowered her voice and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Sarah shook her head back and forth.

"Not good, huh?"

"No," she whispered, looking down at the carpet between her wet boots.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Sarah waited until she thought the woman would ask another question, then said, "He hit me."

Jennifer waited.

Sarah turned in her chair and stared at Jennifer.

"Can you see my nose?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yes. It looks like it might have been broken."

~~“It was broken.”~~

“Have you notified the police?” Jennifer asked. “Did you provide them with a statement? Or coming here your first step?”

Sarah looked away, acting ashamed.

“I can’t go to the police. He said he would kill me.” Her eyes watered by force of will. She met Jennifer’s gaze, widening her eyes. With her teeth together, she whispered, “And I believe him.”

“We can help from the moment you walk through our door until the day the courts reach a verdict and beyond. I assure you, he can’t get to you now. With our help and your statement, we can have him dealt with. If you currently reside with him, we can get you into the shelter until more suitable arrangements can be made for a more permanent residence.” She paused again. “I can bring in an advisor to guide you through the justice system and the process of pressing charges. We give you a number for purposes of anonymity and one of us become your contact. Think of it like a sponsor helping you through the tough times. Would you allow us to have a medical done? It would help catalogue the marks and bruises. Sometimes as the bruises fade, we forget how bad it really was.”

Sarah stood and removed her winter jacket and began unbuttoning her shirt. Without saying a word, she opened her shirt exposing her white bra and the litany of scars on her abdomen from years of answering Vivian’s messages.

“He has shot me, stabbed me and burned me. He has connections. I’ve tried to leave before but he always finds me. Do you really think the police could stop a man like this? Do you think a women’s shelter would protect me from him, because I don’t.”

Jennifer’s eyes had widened slightly at Sarah’s candid display. She composed herself as she cleared her throat.

“We can help,” Jennifer said, her voice less convincing. “No man is above the law—”

“You haven’t met my man,” Sarah said as she buttoned her shirt back up.

“You sound like you’re not interested in help.”

“Oh, I’m interested.” She sat back down. “But I’m not convinced anything will help.”

“What can I say that would convince you? With the proof of his actions on your skin, and a sworn statement, the police could arrest the man in question today. He would be off the streets and unable to hurt anyone else. Your shelter would be confidential. No one would ever know where you are. He could never find you.”

Sarah looked around the room and then stared at nothing.

“It’s all my fault,” she whispered.

“It is never your fault when someone decides to abuse you. You can’t make him raise his hand.”

~~She turned and glared at Jennifer. "My father beat my mother and me, and no matter how many~~ times I told a teacher or an adult, nothing was ever done about it. The asshole alcoholic went on drink himself to death. I grew up bitter, hating men but desiring them, needing them." The lies were deeper. She was happy her loving father never had to hear this.

"That still doesn't excuse what this man has done to you," Jennifer said, looking more and more uncomfortable.

"Yes. It. Does."

"I'm curious." Jennifer leaned back in her chair and looked down her nose at Sarah. "Why are you protecting the man who did this to you?"

"You're new here, aren't you?"

That caught Jennifer by surprise. She adjusted in her seat and rested her elbows on the armrests.

"I'm not new, but this is about you and why you came here today. We can talk about me another time. I would like to help you. Coming here today, telling me a part of your story, displays a desire to get help. I'm only questioning why you're still fighting it. Or are you fighting yourself? You are safe here. You can let it go. It's over."

"Maybe this was a mistake." Sarah stood and zipped up the lower part of her jacket. "I caused this."

"How do you figure?"

"I taunt him. I go too far. When he gets home late from work, I ask who he's been fucking. It drives him crazy. One night, I cooked for him, made everything all special, then threw the lasagna on the floor and told him to eat off the kitchen tile like the dog he is. That one got me knocked out for hours." She moved toward the door. "So, do you see? Maybe this was a mistake. If I could only learn to control my jealousy and my mouth, maybe he wouldn't hit me so much. Maybe if I'm nicer, he will be too."

"It's not your fault," Jennifer repeated as she swiveled in her chair to watch Sarah. "There are lots of relationships that go through problems, issues that may even need counseling, but violence is never the answer."

Sarah remained at the door. She looked Jennifer up and down, happy there were people like her helping the weak, sad that she had to lie and make up this story because Vivian told her to.

According to Vivian, coming here today and fabricating a story would save other women's lives and stop something called the 'ultimate reset' from happening again.

The ultimate reset? What the hell is that?

"He'll kill me," Sarah whispered at the door.

“He can’t if you stay here and let us help you.”

“It’s my fault,” she repeated. “I did this.” Fake tears moved down her cheeks. “I deserve what he’s done to me. And maybe, just maybe, if he ever kills me, it will be because I deserved that too.”

“There’s a way out of this. You can stop it. Please let us help you.”

“Coming here was a mistake. I’m sorry.”

“No, it was the first step in healing.”

“Don’t be contrary for contrary sakes,” Sarah snapped.

Jennifer’s hands came up. “I’m sorry. Please forgive me, but I was only stating—”

“Go ahead, invalidate my point now.” Acting crazy was never too hard for her. “You people don’t understand me. You never could. You haven’t walked in my shoes. You don’t know me.” She wiped the tears off her cheeks as anger replaced the crying. “Just for a minute I wish you could look inside my life. Then you would know how I torture men, too. I’m just as mean, just as horrible. But because he raised a hand, he goes to jail and I get a free pass to move onto the next man, willing, ready and able to be tormented. No, no thanks. I’ll stay right where I am until he either kills me or leaves me. She opened the door and stepped into the hall. “What a fucking mistake coming here. I actually thought you people could help.”

She pivoted on her heels and bumped into a woman being escorted to another room.

Shit, didn’t mean for someone who really needs help to hear that.

She wanted to whisper an apology, but instead met the woman’s blackened eyes and instantly saw her broken spirit.

Chances are, she didn’t hear me.

Their shoulders brushed as she passed Sarah in the hall. Then she disappeared into another room.

Jennifer stood behind Sarah. “If you change your mind, we would love to help you into a new life. I could arrange counseling.”

“No thanks. Tried that once. Counselor just wanted to discuss my parents and my childhood. Another waste of time.” She started down the hall toward the front of the house. “Thanks, Jennifer. I’m sure what you do is helpful, but you can’t help me. I shouldn’t have come today. I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

Jennifer followed her up the hall. “I assure you it wasn’t a waste of time, and if you change your mind, I’ll be here.”

When Sarah reached the door, she zipped her jacket up and wrapped her scarf around her neck. After pulling her hair clear of her jacket, she opened the door and stepped outside. With one last look behind her, she saw Jennifer watching her exit.

~~A thought dawned on her. If they ever found out who she really was, they would think it was~~ Aaron, a martial arts expert who she had come to complain about. She prayed that Vivian hadn't set things in motion that would hurt Aaron. Even though they didn't know who she was and could never find her, it was still disconcerting.

She stepped off the porch. The snow had left a new film on the shoveled patio stones. When she got to the gate, a police cruiser pulled up.

Dressed for the weather, the cop got out of his cruiser and placed a hat on his head. The hardness in his face revealed his age. He was either near or past retirement. When he met her gaze, he squinted, the crow's feet on either side of his eyes deepening.

As he walked around the cruiser and stepped onto the sidewalk, Sarah moved aside. He nodded and smiled at her as he moved past to the gate.

At least he's not here for me.

A moment of recognition flashed across his face. He did a double-take, then looked away as if he had violated her privacy.

Nothing about him was familiar to her.

She slipped on her gloves and started walking. In minutes, she had made it down the street and turned down another.

She hailed a cab five minutes later and gave Aaron's home address.

With the first of Vivian's tasks complete, she had to get home to plan the next one. She had to go shopping for something sexy. Getting a job at a massage parlor was something she never thought her sister would ask of her. It was also something she could never tell Aaron about.

He would forbid it.

It was easier to just go and do what Vivian asked and then explain to Aaron why it was so important. Over the years, it was only Parkman who had ever understood her.

Sarah wondered if her relationship with Aaron would last.

Could she be with someone she had to lie to?

Chapter 3

Staff Sergeant Alan Lyson stepped inside the crisis center's front door and shuddered from the temperature change. He quietly closed the door and moved to the window to watch the woman pass as she passed at the gate. She trudged through the snow as she headed down the street.

"Alan?"

He spun around. "Jennifer."

"What are you up to?"

"Stopping by to volunteer as usual. Who was that girl? The one who just left."

"Unless we're processing her, taking her statement and pressing charges, I can't tell you. But you already know that. Why do you ask?"

He straightened his back and stepped away from the window as he undid his jacket.

"Anyone here that might want to talk to me?" he asked.

"It's bad. Woman in the back claims to have been beaten by her boyfriend and a couple of his gang members."

"Just beaten?"

Jennifer shook her head. "Evidence of rape but it's not recent, like in the last few days."

"Hospital involved yet? Examinations done?"

"No."

"I could meet you at the hospital."

"She said she wouldn't leave without a police escort. Since you're the kindest soul around, and you hadn't called it in yet, would you oblige?"

"Fair enough, you got me." He smiled. "But don't forget, I retire in March. You're going to have to find some other kind soul to volunteer, which means you should start looking soon."

Jennifer walked over, wrapped an arm inside Alan's and started him toward the hallway.

"Maybe you could recommend someone for us."

He looked sideways at her. "Sure, if you tell me what that girl said to you or if she told you her name."

"What girl?"

“The one who left when I was coming in.”

Jennifer pulled Alan to a stop.

“Why is she so important?”

“Because I think I know her. It may sound impossible, but I’ve seen the look in those eyes before. I recognized her eyes. They’re piercing, intense. I’m sure that was Sarah Roberts.”

“How would you know her? Have you arrested her before?”

“It’s not like that. Remember, I’m a staff sergeant, a platoon leader and now the DIC, Detective in Charge of a major case. I know a lot about my officers, who they arrest and who they deal with. I see the mug shots and the arrest records.”

“You think she’s been arrested by one of your officers?” Jennifer asked.

Alan looked up and down the empty hall. In a lowered voice, he said, “I lost some good cops last summer at that massacre in the mall downtown. When it was all said and done, Detective Waller, one of the best detectives our force ever had, retired because of it. The girl at the center of it all walked away. She left for the States somewhere. Last I heard, she was in Las Vegas. At least that’s what the papers said when the Las Vegas Police issued a statement claiming the girl in question had helped them solve a mastermind loan shark murder scam of some kind.”

“And you think the girl who left here five minutes ago is that girl?”

“If she was, I want to know. Actually, I need to know. I can’t have her running around my city without my knowledge. She’s too dangerous.”

“Then you have the wrong girl.” Jennifer gestured to a door.

Alan didn’t move. “Why do you say that? How can you be so sure?”

“Because I saw her wounds. Scars from what looked like stabbings and bullet wounds. She had a tough go of it. Oh, and her nose was recently broken but healing nicely.”

Alan leaned against the wall. “What would she come here for?” he asked, almost to himself.

“What are you talking about? Why else would abused women come here?”

He met Jennifer’s eyes. “If it’s the same girl I’m thinking of, she’s not been abused.”

“It sure looked like that to me.”

“As far as I remember, the girl I’m talking about broke her nose in Vegas. Those wounds were inflicted on her as she fought a killer. If I’m right, her name is Sarah Roberts. She’s a known vigilante.”

“She’s a *what*?” Jennifer asked, mouth agape.

~~“A vigilante. Like Charles Bronson in the movie *Death Wish*.”~~

“Never saw it.”

“No one is abusing her because no one can.” He paused for a moment. “What did she tell you? It’s important.”

“I can’t tell you that—”

The door opened beside Jennifer. She turned around and spoke quietly to one of the other volunteers. The door shut softly.

“She came here for the same reasons every other woman comes here,” Jennifer whispered. “At least that was my understanding.”

“Then she lied. Something else is going on.”

Alan walked back to the front foyer.

“Wait. Aren’t you going to help this woman here?”

“Yes, just give me a sec.”

Alan called HQ to have Sarah Roberts located and her last known address sent to him. He had questions related to a murder from last summer. At least that was what he would let everyone think.

Then he would go to her and find out what she was up to.

And ask for her help in finding a killer, a case he was just assigned to.

He was retiring in two months. The last thing he wanted was more dead people on his hands because Sarah Roberts was in town.

He yearned for a smooth transition into retirement but something told him he wouldn’t get it.

What the fuck is she doing in my city?

He walked down the hall and entered the room where a woman sat with two black eyes, his mind elsewhere.

Chapter 4

Special Agent Penn Kierian of the FBI sipped his coffee in the warm front seat of the rented Impala and waited for Sarah to leave the crisis center. He'd called it in to his partner, Clint, as they were going to switch shifts soon.

Sarah came out of the building and paused at the gate to check out the Toronto cop. He walked past her, both of them pausing.

What was that all about?

Then she started down the sidewalk at a brisk pace.

He made a mental note to check out what she was doing at the crisis center as he followed a safe distance back. Once she was in the cab, he knew where they were going as the taxi headed toward Aaron's apartment.

He parked in his usual spot and left the engine running for heat. The roads had been cleared pretty well, but the wind and snow showed no signs of abating.

His cell phone rang.

"Kierian here."

"Where is she now?" Clint asked.

"Back home. I have no idea why she went to the crisis center. She didn't stay long."

"Let's just hope it's her sister's doing. We've been on this boring detail too long. I have no idea how much longer they're going to fund this."

"Don't worry about that. They will never give up on this girl. If we don't get something on her soon, they'll just replace us."

Clint didn't respond.

"You still there?" Kierian asked.

"Yeah. I'm heading over. You want anything?"

"No. Just my hotel and a hot shower."

"Okay, see you soon."

He dropped the phone beside him and turned the vents up to clear the ice that had started to form on the windshield.

"Damn you, Sarah Roberts," he said out loud to the empty car. "Why are you taking so long to perform your magic tricks?"

~~They had watched her for five months. Followed her from Vegas. Stayed a week in Maine where she visited that cop friend of hers, Parkman. Many nights, Kierian had sat outside Aaron's dojo and watched him train her in self-defense moves.~~

In all that time, he didn't see a single act of violence, or a warning, or anything from Sarah. No crimes being solved. No superhero or vigilante stuff. All he needed was one and then he could grab her. But not until they had proof.

He would need the message as well. However her sister communicated with her was critical to his investigation. Orders were orders. They were supposed to stay on her until they got what they came for. Or until they heard different.

So how did a crisis center play into her life? Aaron wasn't mean to her. Kierian was witness to night after night of dinner and wine, the evening strolls, the theater. Aaron's home phone was being monitored. They'd received the paperwork within days of arriving in Toronto to set up the tap.

But still nothing.

If she was ever a real psychic or a real Automatic Writer, Kierian and Clint had seen no evidence of it in over five months.

"All I need is one slip up and you're mine," he whispered as he stared at the amber light in the living room window of Aaron Stevens' second floor apartment.

Kierian lifted almost a foot off his seat and banged his knee on the steering wheel when someone knocked hard on the frosted window beside his head.

He shouted and cursed as he opened the door to Clint's smiling face.

"Reporting for duty. Shift-change time."

"You asshole. You scared the shit out of me."

"Oh, sorry about that. Just wanted to see if you were awake."

Kierian got out of the car, pulled his jacket tight around his shoulders and started away from the Impala.

"When I come back in the morning, I'll see just how awake you are too," he said. Then he added under his breath, "Asshole."

When he looked back at Aaron's apartment before turning the corner, the light in the living room was out.

He turned the corner and hustled along the snow and ice-covered sidewalk toward the hotel three blocks away, hoping Clint had seen the light go out.

If Sarah left the apartment and performed a task under Vivian's direction and they missed it

there would be hell to pay.

At least that's what their superiors had told them.

They could not have a vigilante running around causing havoc. Not anymore. Too many people had died and not a single charge had ever been brought against Sarah Roberts.

The FBI aimed to change that.

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